Rationalising racial inequality: ideology, hegemony, and post-racialism among the Black and South Asian middle-classes

Abstract

Drawing upon thirty-eight qualitative interviews with Black and South Asian middle-class individuals we theorise post-racialism as a hegemonic ideology. While research tends to focus on how racialised people experience racial inequality, some of our participants rationalised such inequality through a post-racial understanding. This post-racial understanding involves commitments to racial progress and transcendence, the view that racism is no longer a societal issue; race-neutral universalism, the belief that we live in a colourblind meritocracy; and a moral equivalence between anti-racism and anti-racialism, allowing for forms of 'cultural' racial prejudice. We examine how these components of post-racialism travel from the political macro-ideological level, to the micro-phenomenological level. Through this analysis we argue that these post-racial rationalisations are not the result of false consciousness, but reflect how post-racialism, as a hegemonic ideology, can manifest itself as common-sense and consistent with particular individuals' histories of mobility and success.

Key Words

Black middle-class, ideology, post-racialism, race, racial ideology, racism, South-Asian middle-class

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Post-racialism as a hegemonic ideology

> There can no longer be an argument that if you can't get on [it is] because you are Black. There are lots of other reasons you can't get on – you're incompetent, you can't speak properly, you can't spell, you don't get to work on time. But it's not because you are Black (Ken Olisa, quoted in Gordon, 2015).

Since 2007, a 'Powerlist' has been published in the United Kingdom aiming to rank the most influential Black-Brits. Not only did Ken Olisa, the Queen's Lord Lieutenant of London, top the list in 2015, but, as evident from the above quote, he sees the list as emblematic that racist structures no longer constrain Black people from succeeding in Britain. This paper provides a sociological account of such instances where racialised minorities who have broken through the glass ceiling sanction post-racialism.

Drawing upon a selection of narratives from thirty-eight qualitative interviews with British Black and South Asian middle-class participants, we theorise post-racialism as a hegemonic ideology. Post-racialism is ideological because it purports a vision of the world which 'denies the significance of race in ways that diminish, cover up, or naturalise […] a highly racialised structure of power' (Costa, 2016a: 508). This ideology of the declining (or absent) significance of race is often construed as common-sensical, thus rendering it hegemonic (Gramsci, 1971). The consent of middle- and upper-class racialised minorities to post-racialism is integral to its hegemonic status; this is because it obfuscates how whiteness remains dominant even in a post-racial world.

This paper seeks to build upon current understandings of post-racialism by explicitly focusing on how state-based macro approaches to post-racialism are also diffused in the micro, practical, interpretive level of some Black and South Asian middle-class individuals. We examine how three constituent parts of post-racial ideology are made *phenomenological* through becoming common-sense in the everyday level. These constituent parts are *racial progress and transcendence*, the view that racism is no

longer a key contemporary issue*; race-neutral universalism*, the belief that we live in a colourblind meritocracy; and a *moral equivalence* between anti-racism and anti-racialism, allowing for 'cultural' racial prejudice.

The logic of post-racialism

Post-racialism has become a sociological buzzword, understood as either 'the motivated ideological denial of racism's enduring sociality' or 'as an anti-racist ideal' (Titley, 2016: 2). Our focus on post-racialism in this paper is concerned with the former understanding, which construes post-racialism as an ideological whitewash of racism.

Post-racialism is an ideology claiming that society 'transcend[s] the disabling racial divisions of the past' (Bobo, 2011: 14). Ideologies involve 'the mental frameworks – the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation' used to 'make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works' (Hall, 1996a: 26). As conceptual schemes, ideologies distort the social world – this is no different with post-racialism. Although post-racialism construes the world as 'beyond' racism, it functions to reproduce the racial status quo within which whiteness remains dominant. Whiteness here does not refer to the position of all people racialised as White, but 'the socially constructed and constantly reinforced power of [certain] White identifications, norms and interests' (Rollock et al., 2015: 14). These White identifications, norms and interests are not general nor beneficial to the whole 'White population', but predominantly benefit those people racialised as White in the middle- and upper-classes (Hughey, 2010).

The principle way in which whiteness is protected by post-racialism is through the constant denial that racism is still ingrained into the fabric of society. As Burkhalter (2006: 176) argues, 'if we overlook the effect of racism in society, if we pretend that race and racism do not exist, then racism is not a problem to be fought, allowing it to persist and flourish'. Post-racialism thus renders the dominance of whiteness natural. This is often achieved through interpreting what some may see as evidence of racial inequality as the result of non-racial or non-racist events: for instance Black

educational disadvantage is recast as Black students being 'unacademic' (Rollock et al., 2015), housing segregation (for Whites and non-Whites alike) is recast as people gravitating towards those 'like themselves' (Bonilla-Silva, 2010), and Black overrepresentation in the criminal justice system is reinterpreted as Black criminality (Collins, 2004).

However, though post-racialism benefits whiteness, this does not mean that it is only advocated by those racialised as White. It is through winning the consent of racialised minorities that post-racialism buries deeper into social structure. Nevertheless, neither does post-racialism need to win the consent of *all* racialised minorities. Rather, 'an ideology is not dominant because it affects all actors in a social system' but when '*most* members (dominant and subordinate) of a social system have to accommodate their views vis-à-vis that ideology' (Bonilla-Silva, 2010: 152). Through the endorsement (at varying levels) of *some* racialised minorities, post-racial ideology can render itself hegemonic, meaning that it becomes instilled as common-sense. Common-sense here refers to 'the taken-for-granted "naturalised" world' (Hall, 1995: 19), beliefs which are often seen to be 'given', but are actually rationalisations of the world, produced by and productive of ideologies. Post-racial ideology's hegemonic standing thus enables 'racism itself [to become] normalised and concealed, reinforced and reproduced every day in interactions and institutions' (Costa, 2016b: 477).

Viewing post-racialism as a hegemonic ideology requires us to focus on the lifeworlds of those racialised minorities who consent with it, as they become incorporated into the racialised social system's 'power bloc' (Gramsci, 1971). This refers to the process whereby the racially dominant, as a means for continuing rule over the racial hierarchy, recruit particular racialised minorities as allies. Through establishing consent with these 'allies', it becomes easier to mask the association between whiteness, post-racialism, and systemic racism. As St Louis (2015: 120) comments, post-racial rationalisations 'are presented as all the more compelling as spoken from mouths of colour'. Both the *securing* and *obscuring* of domination through post-racial ideology, therefore, relies upon the consent of particular racialised minorities.

Winning the consent of Black and South Asian middle-classes

International scholarship has thus focused on the relationship between post-racialism and racialised minority middle-classes. While such studies have mostly concentrated on the Black middle-classes, we believe the central theories resonate with our research on the South Asian middle-class.

In the US, Frazier's seminal *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957: 147) critiqued the Black middle-class for adopting 'the white man's values and patterns of behavior' while turning their noses up to the 'black mass'. Although Frazier's work may appear outdated, it still resonates in some contemporary studies. For instance, Moore (2008: 505) encountered a 'middle-class minded' group of Black middle-classes in her Philadelphia-based research who adhered closely to an 'integrationist ideology' while maintaining a degree of disdain toward lower-class Black people. Similar findings to these are also appearing in South African studies. Both Khunou (2015) and Southall (2016), for instance, have brought to light how particular groups of Black middle-classes in South Africa are lambasted for standing against the 'deracialisation of the economy' aims of the post-apartheid era for the sake of their own pockets.

Similarly to the South African case, research on post-racialism and the Black and South Asian middle-classes in Britain is still in an embryonic stage, with a significant amount of research demonstrating how the Black British middle-classes largely reject post-racialism. Daye's (1994) mixed-methods study of Black professionals in London, for instance, found that many hesitated to identify as 'middle-class' because their experiences of racism made them hesitate to define in terms of a category associated with privilege. Likewise, Maylor and Williams' (2011) study of Black British middle-class women highlighted how many reject the 'middle-class' label to stand in anti-racist solidarity with Black lower-classes – a finding echoed in Wallace's (2016) research of Black middle-class identities in a London school. Archer's (2011) study of class identities across different ethnoracial minority groups found that those with a visibly Muslim and/or South Asian identity – in the context of Islamophobic hyper-

racialisation – felt palpable barriers to attaining cultural membership in White middle-class spaces.

However, research has also highlighted how racialised minority middle-classes in Britain are not a homogenous group, with some fractions more supportive of post-racialism than others. In a study of the St Paul's neighbourhood in Bristol, Pryce (1986: 219-20) encountered a group of 'mainliner' West-Indian immigrants, described as 'self-conscious and elitist' who 'tend to view themselves as individuals who are free from the "immigrant problem"'. More recently, Rollock et al.'s (2015) qualitative study of sixty-two Black professionals found that a specific group sided towards an 'incidental' view of blackness. This group perceived blackness only in terms of skin pigmentation, espousing the view that to 'even see or acknowledge race is problematic' (Rollock et al., 2015: 23). Building upon Rollock et al.'s (2015) research, Meghji (2017) has examined how some Black middle-class individuals espouse a class-minded phenomenology. This phenomenology involves cleansing 'racism' and 'race' from one's conceptual repertoire, and consequently seeing society, including all its inequalities, through the lens of class.

However, such class-minded phenomenology is at odds with the position of racialised minority middle-classes in the UK's economy. In particular, quantitative findings in the recent Equality and Human Rights Commission report on British racial inequality (2016), and Li's (2017) analysis of the UK Household Longitudinal Survey for the Runnymede Trust, both suggest that all non-White groups in middle-class occupations suffer racial and ethnic 'penalties'. The structural inequality of the Black and South Asian middle-classes does *not* therefore guarantee that all of those identified as such will adopt a perspective of victimhood.

Understanding such positions of non-victimhood requires an engagement with post-racialism, and how post-racial ideology is given meaning by those who are not racialised as White. In this paper, we engage in such analysis through examining the link between state-based 'macro' approaches to post-racialism, and how these macro approaches are diffused in the micro, practical, interpretive, individual level. In other

words, we analyse how the *ideological* becomes *phenomenological*. Before engaging in this analysis, we present a discussion of our methodology.

Methodology

The research for this paper comes from semi-structured interviews with twenty-three South Asian and fifteen Black middle-class participants in the UK. Our thirty-eight participants were recruited across, originally, two separate research projects both taking place between November 2015 and December 2016. In both cases, the middle-class was defined as those in executive, managerial, and professional roles, as specified by the International Standard Classification of Occupations (2012), although we explored the symbolic dimensions of class in the interviews.

The first dataset comprises twenty-three South Asian middle-class people predominantly of Indian and Bangladeshi descent, interviewed by Rima Saini. These interviews explored participants' subjective class positioning, the nature and extent of their ethnic, racial and religious belongings, and their political identifications. The age-range for this dataset is twenty-five to fifty-five, with a six-to-four split between men and women. The second dataset comprises fifteen Black middle-class people with self-declared African or Caribbean heritage, interviewed by Ali Meghji. These interviews explored the racialised dynamics of middle- and upper-class spaces, as well as the changing nature of British racism. The majority of participants in this dataset were in their forties, the rest evenly spread between those in their thirties or fifties, two in their late twenties and one in their sixties; eight were men, seven were women.

In both datasets, we paid attention to self-identification in order to address the potential homogenising effect of racial categorisation. While participants of the second dataset comfortably self-identified as 'Black' or Black-British, defining their blackness in terms of a diasporic connection, many South Asian participants expressed little affinity with the label 'South Asian'. Many of these participants identified according to ethnic, religious, national, or regional classifications such as 'Indian Bengali', 'Indian Hindu', 'Bangladeshi Muslim', or even more broadly 'British Asian'.

Such South Asian participants are thus referred to in their 'preferred' identification when quoted in this paper.

In both research projects, the post-racial became a salient point of discussion in many (although not all) of the interviews, and after fruitful conversations about our research we brought our datasets together to present the findings of this paper. We analysed the combined datasets through an 'interactive' approach, emphasising a back-and-forth between theory and data (Maxwell, 1996). Through reading and re-reading our combined transcripts we found evidence of some individuals iterating support for 'idealised' components of post-racialism, including *racial progress and transcendence*, *race-neutral universalism*, and a *moral equivalence* between anti-racism and anti-racialism. We coded the transcripts according to these components as they presented themselves in individuals' narratives on their sense of self (for instance some claimed how positive discrimination has benefited them), their perception of societal issues (for instance, some discussed the declining significance of race), and their perception of others (for instance, some believed others simply 'play the race card' as an explanation for their failures). In this respect our coding took account of individuals' narratives and dispositions.

In this paper, we refer to excerpts from a selection of participants' narratives which exemplify 'ideal' iterations of post-racial ideology, as aforementioned. While we stress that the amount of participants who iterated clear support for post-racial ideology were in a minority, we do not think that 'number' ought to be of primary concern so long as we are candid in our recognition that our findings are not generalisable to the whole dataset. However, it is not generalisability that we are primarily concerned with in this paper; rather, we resist the ongoing 'quantification' of qualitative analysis (Denzin, 2017) by focusing on the 'stylistic and narrative elements' of post-racialism (Bonilla-Silva, 2010: 265). Thus, rather than focusing on *how many* participants clearly supported post-racialism, we were more concerned with how post-racial ideology entered *some* individuals' lives with significant qualitative depth, functioning as a primary schema of perception(s).

Our ethnoracial identities as South Asians were particularly epistemically productive in our interviews. While some have criticised the 'race of interviewer effect' as reifying racial difference (Nayak, 2006), we believe that our interviewees often ascribed high importance to our identities as South Asians, and this interview dynamic is worthy of attention. For instance, participants in both datasets sometimes used the interviewers' identities as a springboard to illustrate many of their points. In Rima's research working with participants of a similar ethnoracial background – South Asian – some participants would assume some form of shared practical knowledge concerning the ethnoracial stereotypes and cultural expectations facing South Asians. This was useful for Rima to investigate their participants' cognisance of racial prejudice.

In Ali's research with those identifying as Black, he was constantly positioned and re-positioned as an insider *and* outsider. Many participants, for instance, used Ali's membership at Cambridge University – a space that is often seen as exclusively for the White middle and upper-classes – to draw similarities with their experiences of being the only (or one of few) Black person in their professional workplace. Others used Ali's position in this university as evidence of the demise of institutional racism, giving rise to fruitful narratives on how some participants iterated post-racial ideology. While this inclusionary boundary work led to some interesting conversation, exclusionary boundary work was useful too. For instance, participants often used Ali's racialised identity as a South Asian to discuss the differing intensities of racism toward differently racialised groups in the UK.

Key to our methodology was, therefore, a recognition that these interviews were not isolated from our participants' everyday lives. Rather, they offered an interactional space in which we could meaningfully dialogue with our participants, gaining deep insights into how they make sense of the world(s) they inhabit. In some cases – but not all – post-racial ideology was deployed by participants as a necessary feature of their conceptual scheme. This will now be explored in the following section of this paper.

Findings: post-racialism and practical consciousness

We wish to explicitly state that not all our participants consented with post-racial ideology. As would be expected, our participants ranged on a spectrum from those who rejected post-racial ideology as a myth, towards those who strongly supported it as a reflection of our current reality. As is the case with contested ideologies, many of our participants were positioned toward the middle of this spectrum. They adopted what Taylor (2014: 12) refers to as a 'stronger' post-racial argument: that 'race still matters, but *not as much* as it once did', meaning that they at least 'accommodate[d] their views vis-à-vis [post-racial] ideology' (Bonilla-Silva, 2010: 152). However, while those participants in the middle of the spectrum slipped between narratives of racial progress and continuing racial inequality, those either side had more consistent narratives: either clearly rejecting or clearly supporting post-racialism. Our focus is deliberately on those who iterated clear support for post-racialism, as we believe this can help develop understandings of how contemporary racial ideologies function and maintain hegemony.

Therefore, in this paper we are *not* claiming that those South Asian and Black middle-class participants who support post-racialism are generalisable to the South Asian and Black middle-classes, or even to our sample. Rather, we focus on those supporting post-racialism to show how a person being racialised as Black or South Asian does not require them to be pigeonholed into a fixed, monolithic identity, with a unanimous belief in their group's position of victimhood (Gilroy, 1998). Such theorising provides a static picture of the social formation as simply being characterised as 'Whites versus the rest'. Focusing on our participants who support post-racialism, or iterate the ideology's 'ideal types', is thus intended to contribute towards the project of recognising that contemporary racial inequality is not defined by 'acts' of racism from Whites towards others, but is a structural reality which requires maintenance by a multiplicity of differently racialised people.

Before analysing the lifeworlds of those participants who supported post-racial ideology, we wish to make some qualifications to avoid theoretical oversights. Importantly, those Black and South Asian middle-class participants who did iterate

post-racial ideology were not doing so under the guise of a simplistic 'false consciousness', demonstrating a much more nuanced and *practical* relation with the ideology. The false consciousness model underplays the agency and practical knowledge of the participants of this study, implying that they are simply having a veil pulled over their eyes, presented with a vision of reality which works against their interests (see Hall, 1996a). To view Black and South Asian middle-class support of post-racial ideology in this way overlooks how contemporary ideologies function and win consent. Ideologies become dominant through their consistency with the subject's 'practical, everyday, [and] common sense' levels – what is referred to as their 'practical consciousness' (Hall, 1996c: 431). For an ideology to be accepted into a practical consciousness, it has to be presented as essentially *non-ideological* – what the subject would have [counter-factually] believed regardless of wider, macro-political discourse (Žižek, 1996).

In the case of the Black and South Asian middle-class participants, those who give support to post-racial ideology do so because it is consistent with their practical consciousnesses and life experiences. Most were born poor or working-class, strived to achieve well educationally with positive support from teachers, attended good (if not elite) universities where they continued to have largely positive experiences and gain decent qualifications, moved into professional jobs where they now earn a competitive salary, and continue to do so while being on a ladder of upward mobility (if they have not already made it to the 'top'). Post-racial ideology thus appears completely *non-ideological* to them; it appears more so as a storyline of their own personal successes.

Therefore, of these participants giving support to post-racial ideology, we are not saying that they ultimately support a system which discriminates against them individually. Their life histories are ones relatively free from microaggressions, and their educational and professional qualifications have earned them both economic wealth and symbolic prestige. Neither are we saying they are upholding a system which dominates 'their people', as this would reproduce the 'burden of representation' where non-White people are supposed to talk and live for their entire

racialised group (Hall, 1996b). Rather, we are making the point that it is not only those racialised as White who uphold systems which benefit whiteness; systems which benefit whiteness do not benefit every White person; and a system which ultimately benefits whiteness does not dominate *each and every* non-White person.

On the embodiment of the post-racial: making the ideological phenomenological

Through practical consciousnesses, therefore, ideologies are not imposed upon subjects, but their individual characteristics and storylines *meet* ideologies to render the ideological level *phenomenological* (Bourdieu, 2013). In this paper we thus examine how post-racialism goes from being a macro-based ideology to a set of views that meaningfully intervene in the dispositions of particular Black and South Asian middle-class individuals. In our research we encountered three components of macro-based post-racial ideology that successfully traveled into the phenomenologies of some of our participants, becoming hegemonic in the process. These components, following the work of Costa (2016a), are labelled racial progress and transcendence, race-neutral universalism, and a moral equivalence between anti-racism and anti-racialism. While these macro-based components were expressed in a variety of 'softer' and more 'forceful' versions by our participants, whilst being outright rejected by others, we focus on those interviews within which they were iterated in their 'ideal' forms. It is through these 'ideal forms' that they appear most clearly and consistently, allowing for a more systematic analysis of post-racialism.

Racial Progress and Transcendence: from state policy to individual (non)experiences

Racial progress and transcendence is 'the belief that racial divisions of past generations have been curtailed or overcome [meaning] race-thinking and race-based policies are no longer necessary' (Costa, 2016a: 499). At the macro-level in Britain, this component of post-racial ideology finds life in political discourse and policy. An example of this commitment to racial progress in action can be seen in the rejection of increasing minimum quotas for racialised minorities in Britain's top 100 Financial Trade Stock Exchange (FTSE) companies, with Simon Walker, director general of the Institute of Directors, stating: 'They may not always make good decisions but there is little sign of

systematic racial prejudice at the top of British business' (quoted in Gribben, 2014). For Walker, and those who agree that such targets are 'counterproductive', the fact that only two out of the one-hundred chief executives of FTSE companies are racialised minorities does not provide sufficient evidence for institutional racism (Neate, 2014).

Across our interviews, this shift towards racial progress was iterated in a variety of ways. The most common way was through simple comments such as 'I've never been discriminated against'. However, some participants went further and used their particular (non)experience of racial prejudice as evidence of a comprehensive decline in structural racism. Such iterations of racial progress were often contextualised in what the participants saw as the distinctive experience of being the children of immigrants. Although they were unequivocal in their assertions that their parents faced barriers in their lives solely because of their colour, they were also adamant that the attitudes and institutions that upheld this prior racist system have waned. Some participants offered nuances on this view of non-racism, arguing that although racism may still affect the Black and South Asian lower-classes, 'becoming' middle-class allowed them to move beyond the world of racism. Thomas, a charity CEO whose parents arrived from the Caribbean in the Windrush generation, expressed this view when talking about a shift within his own life-span from being racially discriminated against as a child (in the 1960s), then growing up in an era less determined by race and more by class, and now living as middle-class with his own child, arriving at the view that:

> If you're a middle-class Black girl, living in a middle-class suburb, you're not really gonna get it [racism] – you get insulated, so therefore the world is your oyster. You don't see anything holding you back.

This comment from Thomas displays a pertinent theme for analysing post-racial ideology: that it is not a matter of *deception* as much as it is one of *perception*. Post-racial ideology, like all ideologies, is *practical* to the extent that it is deployed in the individual's level of interpretation and perception. This is why Thomas claims 'You don't *see* anything holding you back'. However, this

leads to a vicious circle whereby post-racial ideology is both a precursor for perception and experience, but also itself produced through individuals' perceptions and experiences. This means that those participants who strongly support the idea of racial progress and transcendence often do so even in the face of what others may interpret as counter-evidence. This can clearly be seen in the case of Keith, a finance CEO, also holding a prestigious state-position[1], who defines as a Black Brit. Even when presented with statistical evidence that Black Africans are one of the highest educational achievers in Britain but one of the worst ethnoracial groups in terms of underemployment (Brynin and Longhi, 2015), Keith was assertive that this was not evidence of the continuing existence of racialised barriers in Britain. He states:

> Well, if that were the case no Black people would get on out doing anything at all [pause] but they do!

Discussing his own rise to the prestigious state-position he now holds, Keith continues:

> So what does that tell everybody? You can be [state-position] while being Black. *Therefore*, being Black was not a factor. So there must be some other reason why all those other people do not get through.

What we see in the case of Keith, therefore, is how post-racial ideology involves a practical engagement with the world. Once created, ideologies do not remain static, but become meaningful when subjects put them into practical use as foundations for their interpretations and perceptions of the world they inhabit (Hall, 1996b). This means that ideologies are always subject to ongoing contestation; their 'hold' over subjects is never a necessary relationship (Gramsci, 1971). Thus, post-racial ideology does not just rely on a macro-political presence, but also has to be articulated through the everyday level of experience. This is why Keith is thus able to move from his own personal story of high success to his generalised assertion that systemic racism has

disappeared. Keith is not being deceived by a pernicious ideology, but rather post-racial ideology develops and is reproduced in his practical consciousness through his perception of his individual successes and achievements. The ideology, therefore, has an *experiential* basis.

From racial progress to meritocracy: inequality in race-neutral universalism

Post-racial ideology does not just revolve around experiences which seemingly corroborate racial progress and transcendence. What makes post-racialism so strong and diffuse is that it is composed of multiple interlocking discourses creating an 'ideological whole'. While racial progress is one constitutive component of post-racial ideology, it appears even more compelling when considered alongside the next component, race-neutral universalism.

Race-neutral universalism claims that society is governed by a colourblind meritocracy. Coupled with the belief in racial progress, the belief that we have arrived at a colourblind meritocracy forms 'resistance to meaningful policy efforts to ameliorate […] racist social conditions and institutions' (Bobo et. al., 1997: 16). Through race-neutral universalism, anti-racist policies are not only construed as antiquated, but also as racist against Whites (Gillborn, 2015). This construction of anti-White racism can be seen, for instance, in the Conservative Party's critique of using state policies to tackle institutional racism, arguing that they would 'institutionalise race discrimination' by favouring ethnoracial minorities (Kapoor, 2011: 1034). More recently Philip Davies, a Conservative MP, responded to suggestions that ethnoracial diversity needs to be increased in the BBC as 'a racist approach' that would discriminate against those (Whites) who got their jobs on merit (Sweney, 2014). Race-neutral universalism thus articulates and reproduces post-racial ideology as 'anti-racism is recast as racism; and the conditions are created for further […] race inequity under the banner of race-blindness' (Gillborn, 2015: 6).

Although none of our participants clearly labeled anti-racist policies as explicitly anti-White, some of the participants did iterate an opaque version of

this argument. Some interpreted their life course through the narrative of positive discrimination, whilst having no clear evidence that positive discrimination has ever actually been aimed toward them. Once again, this shows how post-racial ideology constantly moves between the macro-political sphere, and the individual's experiential domain. For instance, Priyanka, a British-Indian engineer on the management track in a large energy firm, demonstrated this in discussions about the salience of her racial and ethnic background to her sense of self. She suggested that her identity as an Indian woman had only been a *positive* force with regards to her career progression:

> I think it adds, it's not a barrier, it's a benefit […] I don't think I've ever been denied an opportunity and I think if anything people have wanted to [pause] I've had certain champions along the way.

Through narratives of positive discrimination, such individuals do not necessarily adhere to the idea of anti-racism as anti-White, but do seem to buy into a softer post-racial argument that society has become somewhat *less favourable* to White people. This cuts to the contradictory core of post-racial ideology – that although it is an ideology claiming that we are 'beyond race', it is in fact an ideology specifically deployed to maintain the racial status quo. Post-racialism thus develops as something akin to an *ideological counter-force* to the era of equal opportunities legislation, rather than being the state of affairs actually reached after such equality legislation.

While narratives of positive discrimination were not widespread among our participants, the general commitment to race-neutral universalism was more popular. Those participants who believed that we live in a colourblind meritocracy connected this view to their general disposition(s) towards the lower-classes of their racialised groups, making post-racial ideology active in their practical consciousnesses. Thus, belief that Britain is a colourblind meritocracy often resulted in such individuals espousing a 'more volitional and cultural […] interpretation' of racial disadvantage (Bobo et al., 1997: 16). This

means that such individuals consenting with race-neutral universalism were not unaware of racial inequality, but saw racial inequality as a product of non-White communities and 'cultures' themselves, and *not* the result of racism.

Post-racialism thus encourages racial inequality to be rationalised according to a logic of 'anything but racism' (Bonilla-Silva and Baiocchi, 2008). In our research this 'anything but racism' explanation was iterated in various ways, from critiquing employment decisions of the Black and South Asian lower-classes, through to the way these people present themselves in interviews and professional situations. Gary, a researcher in the third sector whose parents originate from East Africa, typifies this approach in his below quote, focusing particularly on the cultural limitations of the Black working-class. Gary was discussing the role of parental strategies for mobility, arguing that poorer Black parents do not equip their children with the social and cultural knowledge needed for upward mobility. Although Gary made a pertinent point that inequality is reproduced through cultural and social arenas, his analysis remains colourblind: he failed to consider the possibility, as highlighted by Rollock (2012) and Yosso (2005), that racialised minorities do not have equal access as Whites do to forms of social and cultural capital. He commented that:

> […] if you pick someone whose parents are well educated, culturally the experiences throughout their lives will allow their children to have a range of different cultural experiences whether it's going to museums or taking them to the kinda places that are culturally rich, encouraging them to read significant literature – more of that, that starts at home.

The participants who, like Gary, endorsed such race-neutral universalist rationalisations of racial inequality also consented to the post-racial grammar of the 'race card'. People complaining about racism, these participants argued, were simply looking for the easy explanation, failing to be true to themselves, or – in the most extreme – being plain lazy. Keith, for instance, was one such participant strongly opposed to those 'playing the race card'. Under Keith's

argument, race was simply another adjective used to describe people. From this position, his complaint was that if you are tall and do not get a job you applied for, then you would be labelled idiotic for blaming this on your tall-ness; the same logic, Keith argues, should be applied to one's blackness.

Other participants iterated similar thoughts to Keith's, with references to their experiences in the professional workplace. Reza, a Bangladeshi Muslim lawyer from Birmingham, stated that before interpreting a judge's dislike in the courtroom towards them as prejudice, ethnoracial minority legal professionals should question their own competence:

> I try to catch myself before I'm like, 'well, you know, what are the possible reasons I could've, they could've not liked me or they could've' and that sort of thing, you know […] it's very easy to think 'well it's because I'm a woman, it's because I'm Asian'. But you have to kind of be a bit more contextual about it and a bit more rational.

Through this rationalisation, Reza dismissed his colleagues' complaints of prejudicial attitudes from judges as personal failures to 'walk the walk [and] talk the talk' of the courtroom[2]. This represents an acceptance of 'WhiteWorld' – that is 'the socially constructed and constantly reinforced power of White identifications, norms and interests' (Rollock et al., 2015: 14). His rationalisation centers the interests of whiteness; racial prejudice remains unseen thus reproducing the racial status quo, while those who believe racial prejudice is holding them back are dismissed the legitimacy of their claim. Once again, therefore, we see how post-racial ideology finds meaning in the individual level – it is not just a macro-political set of ideas but even comes to influence what some participants see as legitimate statements in the micro-level of interactions.

Commitments to race-neutral universalism thus overlap with the contemporary neo-liberal individualisation of inequality, which centers individual shortcomings, rather than structural barriers, for understanding inequality (Ferber, 2007). Through the post-

racial commitment to race-neutral universalism, racial prejudice and racialised structures proceed unmarked and the onus is placed on the individual to identify shortcomings within themselves, or within their own communities, rather than 'blaming' the racialised social system for their situations.

Post-racialism in an anti-racialist era

Through the components of racial progress and race-neutral universalism, some participants rationalised racial inequality through discourses of culture. Through doing so, such advocates of post-racialism cleanse racism from their conceptual repertoires in favour of, what appears to them, a more common-sensical interpretation of racial inequality. The final component of post-racialism analysed in this paper analyses this attack on 'culture' as formulated in the moral equivalence constructed between anti-racism and anti-racialism.

Conflating anti-racism and anti-racialism is misleading because whereas the former involves some attempt to *undo* the material effects of racism, the latter just avoids 'thinking' or talking in terms of race at all. Although post-racial ideology advocates a demise of racial language, this just acts as a means for 'novel […] racist expression' (Goldberg, 2015: 6). Through the endorsement of anti-racialism, racist sentiments and stereotypes can be reproduced through more covert discourses on 'culture' (Lentin, 2005). This is well exemplified in David Cameron's, while Prime Minister of the UK, statement at the 2011 Munich Security Conference:

> Under the doctrine of state multiculturalism, we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and apart from the mainstream [...] We've even tolerated these segregated communities behaving in ways that run completely counter to our values […] when equally unacceptable views or practices come from someone who isn't White, we've been too cautious– frankly, even fearful – to stand up to them.

Shifting the discourse of racism towards disparate 'cultures' and 'communities' allows for the reification of racial boundaries. Through discourses such as Cameron's, there

is little racial language evoked, but the message remains one heavily imbued with racial meaning, namely that 'whiteness constitutes normality and acceptance without stipulating that to be White is to be normal and right' (Bonilla-Silva et al., 2006: 231). In similarity to this shift towards a language of 'culture', in which whiteness often goes unmarked, we found that many of our participants who consented with post-racialism reproduced discourses of culture which further normalised whiteness. In these cases, the participants often explicitly stated that racialised minorities need to assimilate with the 'dominant' culture.

Samuel, of Nigerian heritage, working as a politician in South London, discussed how many Black professionals find it hard to get further ahead in life (for example, via promotions at work) because of their lack of social capital. He blamed this lack of social capital *both* on a Nigerian, and more generally a 'Black' problem, of not being able to connect with anyone outside their culture. Once again, this belief proceeds through the experiential level, in this case Samuel uses the example of his nephew:

> It's like everything he watches, everything he lives with, everything in his single life is like he has never left Nigeria. And I say to him 'how do you understand this society where you are?' Why, how would you go somewhere and say 'I want a job from you' and you can't even discuss Eastenders with them, you can't discuss Coronation Street […] there's nothing you and them can share together because you're still living in your little world which is different from their world […] Some of our people are actually still living in that little community they haven't left.

A similar argument was made by Jagjeet, an engineer and self-made entrepreneur living in Warwickshire, who criticised the stunted occupational mobility of South Asian people for their failure to socially integrate with 'the English' (also referring to White people without using the racial term):

> I do blame the Asian community, erm, I don't blame the English. I think the Asian community themselves have got a lot to answer for. I think if

> I say the English tend to stick together, so do the Asians, in a much bigger way, and they don't wanna venture out either, and this can't be good for the future.

In both these excerpts, one can see how whiteness escapes the *post-racial onus*. As Bonilla-Silva et al. (2006) have argued, White people are one of the most socially, culturally, and spatially segregated racialised groups, although social-scientific and state analyses of segregation tend to focus on racialised minorities rather than White people. Terms used by some of the South Asian participants to describe ethnoracial-specific societies, clubs and networking groups – 'cliquey', 'ghetto', 'inward-looking', and even 'racist' – makes it seem as if racialised minorities *are*, and White people are *not,* choosing to be segregated. The post-racial ideology here, therefore, demarcates a dominant culture for others to assimilate with. This 'culture' is heavily racialised, but the racialised power dynamic – and the concept of the racial itself – is discursively absent.

Conclusion: post-racialism in the racial hierarchy

This paper's primary aim was to theorise post-racialism as a hegemonic ideology. We argue it is ideological because it purports a version of the world that whitewashes racism from interpretations of social structure. We explore the hegemonic manifestation of post-racialism through examining how it was incorporated into some of our South Asian and Black middle-class participants' practical consciousnesses. Three particular components of post-racialism were pertinent to this analysis: the *myth of racial progress*, *race-neutral universalism*, and a *moral equivalence* between anti-racism and anti-racialism. By examining these three components in their macro-political, discursive, and lived forms, we built upon current understandings of the post-racial by pointing to some of the mechanisms through which it becomes socially activated not just as a state-based ideology, but also as a hegemonic force that has effect and affect at the level of consciousness. Our analysis of post-racialism thus goes

beyond specifying who wins and loses under post-racialism, towards a more analytic discussion of how post-racial ideology circulates in the contemporary social formation.

In this paper we have explicitly avoided asking whether post-racialism is more common among Black or South Asian groups; we were more concerned with an introductory, exploratory study into the post-racial. Nevertheless, it is worth appreciating that racialised groups in the UK occupy different positions in the racial hierarchy. Future research could examine how post-racialism is embodied differently, and to different extents, in differently racialised groups. Such research would have to be careful not to polarise these groups who often stand together in anti-racist solidarity, but this is not to say that such research is not warranted. In fact, such research could highlight the polarising power that whiteness attains through post-racialism to demobilise groups that could collaborate to challenge its dominant position.

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Notes

[1] Keith's state-position has been anonymised and kept deliberately broad to protect his identity.

[2] Reza's parallel between those lamenting their racial, and others their gender, identities offers insights into the intersectional 'inequality-blindness' (Ferber, 2007) of neo-liberal states. We believe there is a comparative analysis of post-sexism and post-racialism is warranted, especially as both sets of data suggested that more of the middle-class men than women participants endorsed post-racialism. However, this is the beyond the scope of this paper.

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